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Atari Online News, Etc.
A-ONE Online Magazine
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~ Drying Up Spam Deluge! ~ People Are Talking! ~ Voice Mouse Debuts!

~ AMBER Alert Launched! ~ HiRes Magazine Online! ~ October Sales Strong
~ Global Jurisdiction?! ~ Madster In Contempt?! ~ Virtual Brain?
~ Atari800Win Plus Out! ~ WinDom & Dfrm Now LGPL ~ Xbox Live Selling!

-* Feds Get New Snooping Powers *-
-* Microsoft Discloses Serious Flaw! *-
-* eBay Unveils Used Electronics Online Store *-

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->From the Editor's Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
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What a beast of a week it's been around here! The weather, outside of one day, has been horrendous! Last weekend was a bust for cleaning up leaves. I can't even see my lawn these days because of them. Rain and a little snow last weekend, and the potential for the same this weekend. I was hoping to be done with yard work until the spring, but that obviously isn't working out the way I planned. And I didn't even procrastinate doing this work; the yard was clean for awhile! I guess we'll have to wait and see!

On the plus side, I did take advantage of the lousy weather to get some holiday shopping done. For me, this is a rare occasion because I'm usually a last-minute shopper, slopping through the snow to get it done. Doing any holiday shopping before Thanksgiving is unheard of for me!

Speaking of Thanksgiving, it's almost upon us. Finally, this year, I'll be doing the cooking rather than going to my in-laws for the holiday. That means....leftovers!! And no relatives dropping by! I'm hoping to drive to Maine to see my father and brother over that weekend, so that should be fun. I'm hoping that you all - at least those who celebrate - have a terrific day of Thanksgiving. It's one of my favorite holidays, for the food alone! When I was younger, there were many traditions that I enjoyed such as the annual Turkey Day football game between the two high school rivals, seeing all of my friends during the college break, family, etc. Now it's more of my father calling me to rub it in because his high school alma mater beat my high school alma mater again! Most of my friends are no longer around the area. And, the family has splintered enough that it's difficult to get everyone together like we used to do. So I guess the trip to Maine will fix some of those traditions at least. I hope that many of you will be able to be with family on this holiday and be thankful for the opportunity. Tradition, especially family traditions, are extremely important. Enjoy them while you can.

Until next time...

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WinDom and Dfrm Are Now LGPL

WinDom and Dfrm are now distributed under the conditions specified by the GNU LESSER GENERAL PUBLIC LICENCE.

WinDom is a GEM C-library devoted to creating GEM applications.

http://windom.free.fr/

Atari800Win Plus 3.1 Released

Version 3.1 of Atari800Win PLus has been released. The emulator is based on Atari800 kernel 1.2.4 (with the latest changes) and has lots of new features like network games support using Kaillera library, sector counter, emulation of XL/XE machines with memory capacity of range from 16 KB to 1088 KB, large XEGS cartridges, MegaCart cartridges and switchable XEGS cartridges support, emulation of MultiJoy4 interface.

http://atariarea.nostalgia.pl/PLus/index_us.htm

Full Text of Hi-Res Magazine Online

The full text of Hi-Res Magazine is now online at the Classic Computer Magazine Archive.

http://www.atarimagazines.com

Hi-Res was a short-lived magazine, published from 1983 to 1984, dedicated to the Atari 8-Bit and Commodore 64 computers. The archive includes the full text of (all?) four issues. (The publisher recalls that six issues were published, but no one we consulted has seen issues beyond number four. If anyone can verify the existence of issues 5 and 6, please let me know.)

Highlights include:

Atari, Inc.: The Early Years, An Unauthorized History
    http://www.atarimagazines.com/hi-res/v1n1/atarihistory.php

Video Game Guru - Activision’s David Crane
    http://www.atarimagazines.com/hi-res/v1n2/davidcrane.php

Preview of the Commodore 264 Computer
    http://www.atarimagazines.com/hi-res/v1n4/the264.php

Club Med & Atari
    http://www.atarimagazines.com/hi-res/v1n3/clubmedatari.php

34 Atari and C64 Software Reviews
    http://www.atarimagazines.com/hi-res/index/showreviews.php

Enjoy!
Kevin Savetz

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. Mother nature is being a bit cagey with her choices lately. Warmer than normal, cooler than normal, fog, freezing rain... whatever she feels like throwing at us. Strange days, indeed.

While the weather is so unpredictable, I'm stuck inside with my computer and... my wife. The major difference between the two is that I can shut off the computer. <grin>

While I'm inside and looking for something to do, I tend to let my mind wander a bit. I find that it's like a little mini-vacation.

Yesterday I was thinking about the Jaguar. No, not the car. The Atari game machine. I've never been a great video game player... my nieces and nephews routinely beat me at any game they choose... but it's fun none the less.

Anyway, the reason I was thinking about the Jag was two-fold. First, Apple's latest operating system is codenamed "Jaguar". Second, they've been showing Jaguar car commercials around here lately. I guess they're expecting us to go out and buy each other Jags for Christmas.

What I find most annoying is not the fact that an operating system was named after an animal, nor that a car could well cost more than many people make in a year (although both of those things do annoy me). It's the fact that, in both cases, people seem to have a basic problem in simply pronouncing the name.

Steve Jobs likes to pronounce "Jaguar" as "Jag-Wire". The snooty voice on the car commercial pronounces it "Jag-U-Are". While it's not the first time that I've heard it pronounced either of those ways, it still annoys me. Both of them are accepted, I guess, but is there really a need to make things so complicated? Add to the mix the fact that I recently heard someone pronounce it "Jag-U-Wire", and I'll probably strike the next person who pronounces it in ANY fashion.

Hey, who says that I don't have the holiday spirit? <grin>

Speaking of the holidays, they're on their way. Stores are already predicting a bad year for gift-buying. To tell the truth, I'm not sure that that's such a bad thing. We've gotten so accustomed to judging people and situations by the price of a gift instead of the VALUE of it, that it's possible that we need to "re-set".

Last year, as a lark, I burned a couple of Christmas CDs for friends. Now these weren't your run-of-the-mill holiday CDs. They (they contained the same songs) were titled "Christmas Songs Your Mother Never Sang", and contained... well, let's say 'less than traditional' songs. The songs were carefully selected according to the tastes of the recipients.

Now, for those of you thinking about how terrible and twisted it is that I

would take a joyful holiday and turn it into nothing more than a reason for comedy songs I say, "lighten up". The songs weren't obscene or sacrilegious, and no animals were hurt during the making of the CDs. And it brought smiles and warmth to many more people than just the two that I gave them to for quite a bit longer than the average Christmas gift.

The CDs weren't expensive, and they weren't rare, or even "special". It was the gift itself that was special. I'm kind of in a corner when it comes to doing things that require creativity because I've got none. I'm sure that almost all of the people reading this leave me in the dust when it comes to creativity... including YOU.

It doesn't take much to give a special gift. It doesn't have to be a traditional gift, it doesn't have to be expensive, and it doesn't have to be "normal". It just takes a little bit of thought. So while the stock market is bemoaning the loss of the Christmas rush, go out and buy some blank CDs or some construction paper and glue, or whatever it is that you need to make that special gift.

Enough of that. Let's get on with the news, hints, tips, and info available from the UseNet.

From the comp.sys.atari.st NewsGroup

Derryck Croker talks a bit about using a cable modem:

"I've come to the conclusion that a hardware router is the best solution for me, and at about 60UKP isn't too expensive as it can be hidden as an early Xmas present.

I'd still like to hear of a solution to the business of using a Mac's Ethernet port under MagiCMac, I'm surprised that this apparently hadn't been addressed a long time ago. I'd like to continue to use some Atari Internet clients under MagiCMac, Emailer is still the easiest and neatest mail and usenet client IMHO, although I'd be happy to use Okami.

Of course there's not really any competition to using the usual browsers under the native OS for web browsing."

Djordje Vukovic tells Derryck:

"Note that, AFAIK, the NAT router has to have a sort of extended capability in order for the FTP to work. I think that most, but not all NAT implementations have this feature (this has something to do with the network address being contained in the packets themselves when FTPing, contrary to other TCP/IP traffic- or something like that).

It may be of interest that there seems to be some old and fairly simple but probably sufficiently good routing/gateway stuff for the PCs, running in plain DOS (don't know if it handles NAT). According to the docs, even an old PC AT at 10 or 16 MHz, equipped with two network cards and running DOS has sufficient capability to handle 10Mbit/s Ethernet routing without bottlenecks. In this way one could provide himself with a router at no cost at all."

Rod Smith tells Djordje:

"True. FTP isn't unique in this respect, either. Some NAT routers fail with specific protocols. Most NAT implementations work fine with all

the common protocols, though, including FTP. Some gaming, multimedia, and VPN protocols don't work well with many NAT implementations."

Michael Schwingen adds:

"http://www.fli4l.de/ has a popular, free solution - since it is Linux-based, you will need at least a 386, but 486 to 586 machines can be had for free nowadays, so that should not be a problem."

Jonathan Adams asks a monitor question:

"I have a Sony Multiscan 100sx monitor. Will it work with all video modes on an Atari ST?"

Edward Baiz tells Michael:

"I would think it would be possible if you used a piece of ST hardware called a Video Key and a video converter. I have used this setup to hook my STe up to my Compaq monitor."

Steve Sweet adds:

"If they do fail then its unlikely to cause any damage so you've nothing to lose by trying."

Charles Stanley posts this about Papyrus:

"After extensive explorations, I have to conclude that Papyrus is finally dead as the Dodo. After all the promises..... "

Derryck Croker asks Charles:

"The web page explains that there are problems taking credit card orders ATM, is that cause to give up hope?"

Steve Sweet adds:

"That alone is not reason to declare it dead, although its been receiving CPR for some while now as we've discussed before."

Charles tells Derryck and Steve:

"That must be a different web page than those I saw. One says that Rom-Logicware has, if remember aright, ceased trading; another - I forget which - has their remaining stuff for sale, but Papyrus is not on their list. I was shocked and saddened.

If I have misunderstood, please correct me energetically and I will apologise without restraint. Indeed, I am sorry I posted in the first place."

Derryck tells Charles:

"Ah, I see - I'd assumed that you'd gone to R.O.M's home page itself and garnered this. It's still the same info that was there (re the credit card info) a couple of months ago. They never kept it updated very often anyway.

I don't have any insider info about this situation at all, if you come to any conclusion I'd be glad to hear it! Post away..."

Ulli Ramps tells Charles:

"First, R.O.M. logicware is fine and growing, we didn't have any problems in general, but in detail - only with the English version:

As I already told on our homepage, the highest court of Germany decided to place the credit card companies in duty for all business between the dealer and the customer - which of course is horribly silly.

As a result, the main credit card companies (VISA, Mastercard, ...) found this as silly and stupid as we do and quit every contract with long distance dealers in Germany, like we are.

What made us freeze our English language business somewhat, because there is no clever way to get our money, any longer ...
"Freezing" means, that we didn't force the translation files for Papyrus 9, but they are nearly through, only some days for the finishing - but if it would be ready for release, this would increase the problems, because what to do then? How to sell?

This funny farm decision of our highest court has stopped our foreign language business for months, now. And still does. Great, huh?

The situation's still there, but some in-between-financial-companies promise to find a way to take the risk and to allow companies like us to take credit card orders, again.
We nerve them somewhat daily, to give us new credit card contracts, so I expect us to be able to take orders again, in some weeks.

We have to be able, because there will be an English version quite soon for sure:
We will release an Apple Macintosh native version of Papyrus (for MacOS 9.x and X) within the very next weeks, hopefully before Xmas, and of course we really would like to sell it outside of Germany, as well, somehow ..."

Well folks, that's it for this week. There weren't a lot of messages on the UseNet... Everyone was probably out brainstorming about what kind of special gift to give someone for Christmas. <grin>

Tune in again next week, same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they are saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - October Games Sales Strong!
"""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""" GameBoy To Play On TV!
'Law & Order' A Hit!
And more!

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October Game Sales Strong, ’Vice City’ Dominates

Video game software sales were up sharply in October, financial analysts said on Monday, as the hotly-anticipated criminal adventure game "Grand Theft Auto: Vice City" made a smash-hit debut.

Software sales were up 73 percent in October and are up 31 percent for the year, Gerard Klauer Mattison analyst Edward Williams said in a research note issued on Monday, citing data released by market research service NPDFunworld last week.

The top story of the month, though, was Take-Two Interactive Software Inc.’s "Grand Theft Auto: Vice City," which sold 1.4 million units between its Oct. 29 launch and Nov. 2, at an average price of $48 each, generating more than $68 million in projected revenue.

"Vice City," widely expected by analysts to be the best-selling game of 2002 and perhaps one of the top sellers of all time, is the follow-on to "Grand Theft Auto 3," which was the best-selling game of 2001 and has sold more than 7 million units to date.

In late October, the chief executive of specialty games retailer Electronics Boutique Holdings Corp. said at an investment conference that the game had sold "closer to a million than half a million" units in its first day.

In comparison, Wedbush Morgan analyst Michael Pachter, in a research note last week, said the No. 2 game for the month, Electronic Arts Inc.’s "NBA Live 2003," sold just over 260,000 units, generating just north of $13 million.

"The strong October retail sell through increases our confidence that we will see significant increases in monthly retail sales figures for the balance of the year, as most publishers gear up for the holiday season with strong product releases," Wedbush Morgan analyst Michael Pachter said in a research note last Friday.

Pachter noted that 12 games sold more than 100,000 units in October, and he said he expected more than 30 games to top that mark in November and more than 100 to do so in December.

Nintendo Plans Device For GameBoy to Play on TV

Japan’s Nintendo Co Ltd said on Tuesday it would launch a device to allow games used in its GameBoy series to be played on a TV screen via its GameCube home video console.

With the new product, which will increase the selection of games that can

be played on GameCube, Nintendo hopes to recover some lost ground in its mainstay home game console market where arch rival Sony Corp maintains a dominant lead on the strength of its PlayStation 2 system.

Nintendo, known for its hit "Mario" and "Pokemon" games, said the new device can be connected to the base of GameCube to allow game software for the existing GameBoy, GameBoy Color and GameBoy Advance systems to be played on TV screens.

The new player, which is flat with a square surface equal to that of the GameCube, will hit store shelves next March in Japan and May in the United States, followed by releases in Europe and Australia, the company said.

The device will sell for 5,000 yen ($41.32) in Japan.

The price tags for other markets have not been decided, a company spokesman said, adding that Nintendo expects gamers will load up on hardware ahead of the new product's release.

"We wanted to send a message to game lovers about what they will be able to do with the GameCube console in the future," he said.

"In that way, we aim to shore up sales of GameCube hardware during the upcoming Christmas shopping season."

He said there is big demand for a device that allows GameBoy users to play the games on their home TVs, pointing to the sales of 6.9 million units of a similar device in the past.

In 1994, Nintendo released a product that enabled GameBoy games to be played on TVs via the Super Family Computer.

"Given technological advancements and the number of GameBoy games, we expect the sales of the new device to exceed the past record," the spokesman said.

But some analysts see little chance that the new product will accelerate GameCube's sales.

"The device would provide existing GameBoy holders with more options and a comfortable environment to play games, but it would not boost GameCube sales dramatically nor snatch players from Sony's PlayStation 2," said Takeshi Tajima, analyst at BNP Paribas.

Nintendo is locked in a fierce three-way battle with leader Sony and laggard Microsoft Corp for dominance in the home game console market.

Nintendo's GameCube debuted in September 2001 and had sold a total of 1.59 million units by the end of September in Japan.

That's well behind Sony's PlayStation 2 with accumulated sales to the end of September of more than 10 million units since its debut in March 2000.

But the GameCube is beating Microsoft's Xbox, which had sold only 278,860 in Japan by September since its delayed launch in February 2002.

Facing sagging demand for its GameCube hardware and software in addition to a loss on its hefty foreign-currency assets, the Kyoto-based Nintendo in October slashed its estimate for first-half recurring profit -- pre-tax

and excluding extraordinary items -- by 77 percent.

It also trimmed its shipment target for the GameCube console for this business year to 10 million units from 12 million.

As part of its effort to boost drooping GameCube sales in Japan, Nintendo plans to release a silver-colored GameCube console on December 1, followed by a wireless controller for the GameCube on December 5.

Strong Demand for Xbox Online Gaming

Software giant Microsoft Corp. said on Friday that nearly all of its online gaming systems have sold out in about one week on retail shelves, totaling some 150,000 "Xbox Live" kits.

Xbox Live is an online gaming service launched last week by Microsoft, a key component in the Redmond, Washington, company’s $2 billion strategy to make its video game console the center of a networked home entertainment system.

"Virtually every Xbox Live Starter Kit at retail locations across the United States and Canada has sold out in less than one week," the company said in a statement. "(The kits) will be replenished throughout the holiday season."

The $50 kit includes a one-year subscription to the service, demonstrations of two games and a voice communication kit that will allow game players to talk to each other through the company’s global network.

Microsoft also reported related strength in sales of Xbox Live-enabled games, while Xbox hardware sales have experienced an 18 percent week-over-week increase in the first week of Xbox Live Starter Kit availability.

Sony Corp., the leader in the game console market, in August launched its competing online adapter, a $40 unit that attaches to the back of its PlayStation 2 machine.

Analysts have said Microsoft’s pre-launch estimate of 100,000 Xbox Live users was conservative as the same number of people had already expressed interest in joining test programs for the system.

’Law & Order’ CD-ROM Deserves Favorable Verdict

The new computer game based on television’s popular "Law & Order" program gives PC owners the chance to play both detective and prosecuting attorney in the case of a murdered investment adviser.

"Law & Order: Dead on the Money" ($30, Windows) unfolds like an original episode of the hit TV show, with interesting characters, sharp dialogue and some nice twists and turns -- some of which involve insider trading on Wall Street.

Legacy Interactive has created the mystery story and courtroom drama using

features typically found in an adventure game, such as video clips, scenes to explore and plenty of personal interaction with the characters.

The "puzzles" involve finding a password to a computer, the combination to a safe, and the right pieces of evidence to get people to spill their guts.

The story opens with the discovery of a woman’s body in New York’s Central Park. Detective Lennie Briscoe is called to investigate and players assume the role of Briscoe’s partner.

The game uses virtual characters, sometimes known as cyberpuppets. But the computer-generated humans have a convincing array of expressions: you can see the perps twitch nervously when Briscoe and his partner ask the right questions.

And there’s nothing virtual about the voices. Jerry Orbach, who plays Briscoe on the show, does the voice-over for his character, as do the actors who play Briscoe’s supervisor and the assistant district attorney.

The first half of the game focuses on the police investigation. At the murder scene, the player must scour the area, looking for clues to the identity of the victim. You’ll need a good computer monitor to see some of the tiny pieces of paper that must be picked up. Items that seem significant must be stored in a case file, where they can be sent to the crime lab or the research department to get more information.

When someone needs to be interviewed, the player selects from three questions -- an aspect of the game that isn’t particularly challenging. Many of the questions are obviously not relevant to the investigation, and if you miss the opportunity to ask a key question the first time, the game gives you other chances.

The controls for the game are very easy to use. To send things to the lab, just click on the casebook to open it, find the lab form, drag a picture of the evidence into a box and click "submit." Your cell phone rings when the results are ready. If you need to go somewhere, click on the map icon and select the location -- but be careful because some locales are below the screen and you need to scroll down.

If you identify the perpetrator and include all the key evidence into your arrest warrant, you’ll move on to the trial part of the game and assume the role of prosecuting attorney.

You’ll also have to do some gumshoe work because the judge has thrown out a key piece of evidence, so you must snoop around for additional information.

At trial time, you select the order in which the prosecution witnesses are presented and the questions to be asked. You can also object to a defense question if it’s out of line, although the game gives you only a few seconds to do so -- something that is unlike in a real-life trial.

Players unfamiliar with court procedure can do a little research in the assistant D.A.’s office to find explanations of the different reasons for objecting as well as other rules. Those are important to know. Near the end of the game, the defense tries to exclude a piece of testimony. If you don’t select the correct counter-argument (you have a 1 in 3 chance of being right if you simply guess), you lose the case and the bad guy goes free.

Fortunately, you can save the game at any point and try a different path.

Aside from the need to object almost immediately if the defense lawyer asks a bad question, I have a few other objections to the game’s design.

You can’t dawdle in your investigations. For reasons that are not explained, "Law & Order" gives you a time limit for finding all the right clues and zeroing in on the suspect. In real life, the statute of limitations for murder is a lot longer than one week.

There are times when the cursor takes on a life of its own, rapidly skimming past the point on the screen where you’re trying to click. It’s the most maddening element of the game.

Ultimately, with its twists and timing geared to the fast pace of TV drama, "Law and Order: Dead on the Money" is guilty of simulating a television drama better than a real-life murder mystery. But fans of the show and people who like whodunit games will find that this CD-ROM acquits itself well.

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A-ONE’s Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

eBay Unveils Used Electronics Online Store

Web auction site eBay Inc. launched a new online store on Monday designed to make it easier for companies and consumers to buy used electronic equipment, a bid to capitalize on tight budgets for spending on technology.

eBay also said it would offer free shipping on electronics in order to spur consumer sales ahead of the crucial holiday season, a move that tightens a high-stakes promotional competition with rival Amazon.com Inc.

Dubbed eBay Electronics (http://www.ebayelectronics.com), the new online store has already been up and running as a test site, with 700,000 new, refurbished, or used products for sale daily. The site is generating the equivalent of $2.2 billion in annualized sales, according to the Web auctioneer.

While eBay Electronics carries hot-selling consumer items such as digital cameras, video games and flat panel displays, it also sells enterprise-grade equipment as companies hurt by the tech spending downturn sell off their equipment, often to other companies looking to save on investment.

"We definitely have had more business buying activity on eBay over the last year, said Todd Lutwak, director of eBay Electronics, "the best ideas from eBay really bubble up from the community."

In addition to the formal launch of eBay Electronics at the Comdex trade show in Las Vegas, eBay is also introducing free shipping on electronics in

order to spur consumer sales ahead of the year-end holiday season.

Free shipping has already helped boost sales at eBay rival Amazon.com Inc. which cut shipping prices this year in response to customer demand for more affordable online deals.

The promotional shipping offer gathers sellers on eBay willing to ship items for free and features them on a separate section of eBay’s online auction store.

About half of the electronics good sold are used, while the other half are a combination of new and refurbished goods, San Jose, California-based eBay, said.

One video game is sold every second, 3 digital cameras are sold every minute, 27 switches and routers are sold every hour and 1,800 laptop computers are sold every day at the Web store, eBay said.

AOL Puts AMBER Alert Service Online

AMBER Alerts designed to quickly spread the word about missing and kidnapped children are finding their way onto the displays of PCs, pagers, and cell phones of anyone who signs up for the free service through America Online.

The program is officially called America’s Missing: Broadcast Emergency Response, and was named after murdered nine-year-old Amber Hagerman of Texas. Law enforcement transmits AMBER Alerts to television, cable, and radio stations using the Emergency Broadcast System. There are currently 74 states, counties, and cities with AMBER Alert plans in place.

AOL announced the inaugural online implementation of AMBER Alerts in October, and launched the service Thursday. The online service will send the timely information to anyone, AOL customer or not. More than 70,000 people have already registered since AOL began accepting sign-ups in October.

"The goal is to reach as many people online as possible, anywhere and anytime," says Nicholas Graham, AOL spokesperson. "The more eyes made available to law enforcement, the greater the possibility of saving a child, and that is the goal."

To achieve that goal the company is using its existing AOL Alerts service, which traditionally provides users with news, sports, and stock information updates, he says.

AOL is operating the service in conjunction with the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children and federal, state, and local law enforcement authorities, Graham says.

"We’re doing this as a coordinated campaign; we wanted interested people to understand this is a serious issue," he says. AMBER Alerts are credited with saving 36 lives so far.

AOL hopes to add to that number by delivering alerts to a much wider audience, Graham says. In addition to its nearly 27 million online members, AOL is offering the service to registered users of its free AOL Instant

Messenger service, as well as to anyone on the Internet with an e-mail address, a text-based pager, or a cell phone.

Sign-up is free through AOL's site. Registered AOL or AIM users can plug in their screen name for alerts broadcast through the instant messaging (news - web sites) service. Other users must sign up for a free screen name to get e-mail or text-based wireless messaging, Graham says.

During the sign-up process, users enter their zip codes so that AOL can target the messages geographically. The company encourages users to provide both their home and work zip codes.

Users who sign up for the alerts can expect to see them appearing shortly after local law enforcement issues them to the Emergency Broadcast System, he says. The messages are typically concise, offering information such as the child's name and description, details about the alleged kidnapper, and facts about the suspect's vehicle.

Voice Mouse Turns Silent Computer Screens into 'Talkies'

Seventy-odd years after Mickey -- the world's first mouse with a voice -- made his debut in "Steamboat Willie," an Israeli-American technology firm has introduced the world's first "voice mouse." The new hands-free navigation tool promises to turn the last silent screens on the planet, computer monitors, into "talkies" that respond to the spoken word.

Designed to enhance the accessibility of the most important communications tool in a generation, the personal computer, the Commodio QPointer HandsFree enables users to voice-navigate the Internet, write and send e-mail, create and edit documents, and navigate the entire Windows environment. Users "touch any object on a computer screen by voice, similarly to the way a person uses a mouse," said Commodio president Ramy Metzger.

Powered by a Microsoft speech recognition engine and Commodio's proprietary technology, the QPointer allows users to point at screen objects by saying the names of words or toolbar buttons.

With the cursor in position, users voice mouse commands, such as "double-click," or "right-click." Individuals with limited use of arms or hands can operate a computer using the QPointer -- and they represent a growing market Commodio wants to accommodate, chief technology officer Leonid Brailovsky told NewsFactor.

"We found that there exists an accessibility gap. New populations, such as disabled and senior people, are entering the circle of computer users, and there are no adequate means for them to access the computer," Brailovsky explained.

"It is difficult or impossible for them to use the standard pointing devices, like mouse, touch pad or trackball," he added. "These problems become even more severe with the development of new computing environments -- like mobile environments."

The QPointer voice mouse has found an enthusiastic audience among disabled persons because it "gives a simple and intuitive solution to the problem of computer access for these populations," Brailovsky said.

Voice-activated mouse commands take no more time than finger-driven points and clicks, Brailovsky told NewsFactor. "It takes almost the same time to point by voice mouse or by hand, even for a nondisabled person," he said. "A person having hand motion impairments, repetitive strain injury or poor vision will have a clear advantage."

Never a firm to disregard a potential technology market, Microsoft has been developing assistive technologies for more than a decade, explained Gary Moulton, manager of assistive technology vendor relations for the Microsoft Accessible Technologies Group. "The QPointer HandsFree is a key example of a technology that will empower people with disabilities to realize their full potential," he told NewsFactor.

"Getting millions of new customers in the disabled population is not only good business," Brailovsky commented, "it is also the law."

Microsoft Creating Virtual Brain

Researchers at Microsoft's Media Presence Lab are developing a "virtual brain," a PC-based database that holds a record of an individual's complete life experience. Called MyLifeBits, the project aims to make this database of human memories searchable in the manner of a conventional search engine.

"By 2047, almost all information will be in cyberspace -- including all knowledge and creative works," said one of the project's leaders, Gordon Bell. "The most significant benefit will be a breakthrough in our ability to remotely communicate with one another using all our senses."

To enable this remote communication, Bell's group is developing a technology that he refers to as telepresence. "Telepresence technology provides for both space and time shifting by allowing a user to communicate with other users via text, graphics, voice, video and shared program operation."

The core of the MyLifeBits project is an online PC-based system that holds everything that can be digitally stored about an individual. Microsoft researchers refer to it as a sort of "virtual shoebox" that holds all of a person's e-mail, home movies, meeting details and other memorabilia.

Unlike a real shoebox, say the researchers, MyLifeBits would allow a user to input a keyword like "pet" to see and hear all material relating to a childhood pet.

In effect, MyLifeBits would allow a user to run a Google search on his or her life. The database would be searchable in many ways, including by date, allowing a businessperson to find all communications associated with a given meeting, for instance.

MyLifeBits also would be capable of creating personal narratives by cross-referencing chronological material related to two or more people in an individual's life.

"It sounds like weblogging run amuck," Aberdeen Group analyst Dana Gardner told NewsFactor, explaining that the current trend toward Internet self-expression sometimes veers toward the obsessive.

Yet Gardner also sees the value of MyLifeBits, especially as a time capsule for future historians.

He noted that there is currently an overcapacity problem in network fiber, storage and processing capability. "We need to find the application that will utilize the infrastructure that's available, and this sounds like a way of doing that," he said.

Microsoft researcher Bell is himself the guinea pig for the prototype system. He is uploading a massive amount of personal memorabilia, from his trips to Alaska to his biking excursions in France. All of his e-mail is stored on the system, as is his passport, all of his work documents, and recordings of all of his phone calls.

Each of his myriad media files is tagged with a verbal or written identifier, allowing them to be cross-linked to other files. His spoken tags are converted into text files to make them searchable.

Bell said he believes that in the future, this process will be streamlined. "We can optimistically assume that by 2010, speech input and output will be ubiquitous and available for every system that has electronics," he said.

One of the project's chief logistical hurdles involves developing a cost-effective system with the memory capacity of the human mind.

The Microsoft researchers forecast that within five years, a 1,000 GB hard drive will cost less than $300. While this would provide enough capacity to store up to four hours of video per day for a year, it is still not enough to store all of an individual's experiences.

Ensuring the security of MyLifeBits is also a crucial concern, especially given the sensitive nature of the data to be archived. Because the system would be online, making it "hack proof" would be critical before MyLifeBits could become viable in the mass market.

Microsoft representatives were not immediately available for comment.

Jim Gemmell, one of the project's other leaders, described some of the problems with creating this vast archive. "Indexing and retrieval of photographs and video clips can be a headache," he said.

However, Gemmell added, "When it gets too frustrating to find something, you can always watch some of some classic movies you've captured from DVDs."

Feds Get New Snooping Powers

A secret U.S. federal appeals court has granted law enforcement officials expanded domestic spying powers, allowing them to conduct a broad range of electronic surveillance including Internet monitoring and keystroke logging to track terrorism suspects.

The decision, released earlier this week, overturned a previous ruling by the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court (FISC) last May. That decision rejected the U.S. government's efforts to expand its domestic snooping authority.

The move marks a decisive victory for law enforcement officials. It has, however, sparked concern among civil libertarian groups that fear the new powers will infringe on citizens' rights.

The appeals court ruling essentially tears down barriers for federal law enforcement officials conducting surveillance operations. The agencies are now empowered to listen in on phone calls, read e-mail, and conduct secret searches.

Attorney General John Ashcroft hailed the decision, saying that it is a "victory for liberty, safety and the security of the American people."

However, Ann Beeson, litigation director of the Technology and Liberty Program of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) has a very different reaction.

The ACLU is "deeply disappointed with the decision," Beeson said in a statement. The organization also suggests the secret appeals court "exists only to rubber-stamp government applications for intrusive surveillance warrants."

The decision was the first ever made by the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court of Review since it was created under law in 1978 in a flurry of post-Watergate reforms.

The ACLU said it is thinking about seeking an appeal of the decision to the U.S. Supreme Court, but added that only the government could directly appeal its rulings.

Meanwhile, Ashcroft said he is directing a series of actions in light of the decision. Among those expanded investigations is a proposal for a computer system that will allow agents to submit surveillance applications from the field in real time directly to FBI headquarters and to the Department of Justice for approval.

That plan follows a U.S. Department of Defense project involving a new computer system that will sort through commercial and private databases and other information in search of patterns that might indicate terrorist activities. That effort is part of the Information Awareness Office within the DOD's Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency.

Madster Said Violating Court Order

The recording industry filed a contempt motion against Madster, claiming the file sharing service is disregarding a court order to stop the swapping of copyrighted songs and files on its Web site.

U.S. District Judge Marvin Aspen in Chicago ordered Madster to disable access to copyrighted materials on its site under terms of a preliminary injunction issued Oct. 31. The judge found evidence that the swapping of songs on Albany, N.Y.-based Madster, like Napster before it, violated copyright law.

The Recording Industry Association of America, a trade group for recording companies, filed a motion late Wednesday asking Aspen to find Madster in contempt of that order and to appoint a "compliance officer" who could shut

the service down, if necessary.

The Madster site continued to advertise $4.95 a month memberships Thursday. Madster founder Johnny Deep said he would decline comment until filing his response to the motion, which he expected to do on Friday.

Madster started out as a free service called Aimster, but was forced to change its name as part of a settlement agreement with America Online, whose instant-messaging service is called AIM.

It was just the beginning of Madster's legal struggles. Multiple lawsuits involving Madster were consolidated in Chicago, although that litigation was put on hold in March after bankruptcy filings were made by Deep and two companies involved in the service's operations.

A bankruptcy judge in Albany lifted the stay for the limited purpose of allowing plaintiffs to seek the preliminary injunction motion.

Peer-to-Peer Lawsuit Faces Legal Hurdle

In a case that tests global jurisdiction issues, a U.S. federal judge is set to consider Monday whether entertainment companies can sue in U.S. courts the off-shore distributor of the Kazaa peer-to-peer file sharing software.

The company behind the popular P-to-P software, Sharman Networks, is incorporated in the island nation of Vanuatu, operates out of Australia, and distributes the software from servers located outside of the U.S.

Los Angeles District Court Judge Stephen Wilson is slated to decide if the entertainment companies may sue Sharman Networks for allowing the illegal trading of their copyrighted works over the company's P-to-P network in U.S. courts.

Sharman Networks is arguing that it has no substantial contacts in the U.S. and therefore the companies lack jurisdiction to take it to court here.

The hearing is part of a larger case brought by a handful of movie and music companies against P-to-P networks Kazaa, Morpheus, and Grokster. The entertainment companies are seeking a summary judgment against the defendants, claiming that they knowingly allow copyright-protected works to be traded on their networks, dubbing them "candy stores of infringement."

A hearing to consider the summary judgment is scheduled for December 2.

The entertainment powerhouses have already succeeded in a similar bid against P-to-P renegade Napster, which was knocked offline last year. However, unlike Napster, the new generation of P-to-P networks argue that they have no central servers and therefore cannot be shutdown.

Meanwhile, the judge's consideration of whether Kazaa can be sued in the U.S. could help set a precedent concerning global jurisdictional issues.

The hearing is slated for 1:30 p.m. PST Monday at the U.S. District Court for the Central District of California in Los Angeles.

Microsoft Discloses Flaw in Windows

Microsoft Corp. on Wednesday disclosed a security flaw of "critical" severity in most versions of its popular Windows operating system.

In its 65th security bulletin of the year, Microsoft urged users of Windows 2000, Millennium, 98 and NT 4.0 to download a software patch from the company's security Web site. Microsoft's newest version, Windows XP, does not have the problem.

Attackers could exploit a vulnerability in the software that underlies many database functions and take over the user's computer.

The security bulletin is the first to be issued in a simpler format, which Microsoft adopted due to complaints that its bulletins were overly detailed and confusing. The technically detailed bulletins were geared more for developers or system administrators, rather than everyday users, Steve Lipner, Microsoft's security assurance director, wrote in an e-mail to customers.

Microsoft will continue to issue more technical versions for those who want them, Lipner wrote.

The company also added a new category of "important" to how it rates the severity of the security flaws. The most urgent flaws are termed "critical;" the second-most urgent are "important;" the next level is "moderate" and the last is "low."

Cloudmark Aims To Dry Up Spam Deluge

Cloudmark, best-known for SpamNet, a community approach to sniffing out junk E-mail, this week released an enterprise spam hunter/killer engine that identifies unwanted messages by their structure--or spam DNA--rather than by their domains or keywords.

Authority, as the engine is dubbed, blocks spam at the gateway, preventing it from entering a company's network and eating up precious employee productivity.

"Spam's an incredible waste of [enterprise] resources," Cloudmark CEO Karl Jacob says. "It saps employee productivity to the tune of billions of lost dollars. We call it the silent productivity killer."

Authority approaches spam detection in an entirely different way than other anti-spam products, Jacob says. It predicts whether a message is spam by examining its structure and looking for the kind of mutations--composition tricks, essentially--that spammers commonly employ in order to outwit more mundane spam defenses.

"The basic idea is that E-mail messages have structure, just as human DNA does," Jacob says. "DNA can be mutated, and so can E-mail messages." Spammers, he says, commonly mutate traditional message structures, which

is what Authority looks for. "Rather than analyze words, we look at the packaging of the message," he says.

Cloudmark relied on its experience with SpamNet, a peer-to-peer network of more than 200,000 users who report spam to a central database, to identify probable spam structures. "These spam 'genes' are derived from years of looking at millions of messages," Jacob says.

Some spammers encode the body of the message in binary, which the receiving E-mail client--not knowing any better--happily decodes. Traditional anti-spam software lets such messages through, because it sees only the binary numbers, not offensive words.

Another technique that spammers use to make messages stand out or attract attention, Jacob says, is to use repetitive characters, such as multiple spaces between words or exclamation points. If a message's subject line contains a character such as an exclamation point that makes up more than a third of the total characters in the line, it's probably spam.

Authority looks for these characteristics--Jacob estimates that there are only about 150 such spammer "genes"--then assigns a confidence level to each message to let IT managers decide which to block, which to detain, and which to pass along to employees.

While other systems require new hardware--gateways equipped with spam defenses, for instance--and chew up company IT time spent tweaking software or constantly updating the filtering rules, Authority runs on the gateway's hardware and software and doesn't require a connection to an outside service.

"Does it work? In our beta tests at several corporations with over 10,000 users, we saw 90% effectiveness [in identifying spam], and only about 1 in 100,000 false positives," Jacob says.

Authority is available in versions for Unix and Linux servers immediately, at a cost of $10 per mailbox per year, with a Windows edition set for release by year's end.

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